Bang for buck? What´s that?

TEST

You shouldn´t have to spend a fortune, says XTZ. Is that the truth about their CD-100?

By Sven Bilén

XTZ is a company that draws ever more attention as the message spreads around the world. At the moment they are developing distribution in China, but the brand is really taking off in Europe as well. We have known XTZ for a long time as a producer of extremely price worthy products, cheap but utterly nice. This time we take a closer look at their CD player CD-100.

What should it cost?

"We think a good CD player should not have to cost a small fortune, it should be possible for most people to buy. A stable chassis and well proved electronics is the foundation for good quality thinking.", says XTZ.

And a stable chassis it is. It´s a real battlewagon we are dealing with here. XTZ CD-100 is built and looks like it would cost severly more. And then I really mean severly. The finish is a kind of velvet powder varnish, making the unit very nice to the touch, with a surprising feeling that the massive aluminum – the player is almost entirely made from aluminum profiles – is soft and smooth..

I tried asking guests what they think the player would cost, and none of them guessed a price below 4 digits. Sure, it has been standing among units that nobody would doubt costing money, and the CD-100 has clearly done very well in c ompany of these units. There were some long faces when the real price tag was revealed. And this only judged by the looks and general impression of quality – we will get to the sound.

About the construction

Concerning connections, both balanced - XLR (not usually seen in this price range) and two pairs of unbalanced RCA outputs are available. I´m not sure why two sets of RCA outputs would be necessary, but nonetheless there they are. Digital output is available as Toslink and coax – digital inputs are not available – but XTZ are working on this.
On the back panel we find the mains switch.
Talking about power, the CD-100 automatically enters standby mode if no signal has been present for 30 minutes. We should all save power where possible, and this is a good initiative.
The front panel has a couple of buttons worth mentioning. The Eject button is located above the other four buttons, and the On/Off button is placed all by itself. If only you knew how many CD players there are where they haven´t thought about these obvious things, that the buttons should not be easily mistaken. The CD-100 layout is well thought out and the design is not compromised.
The display is easy to read, it has blue text, just the right amount of information and can be dimmed in three steps – and and you are welcomed by a "Hello" at power up. The tray takes a second to react, but glides smooth and silently in and out. The loading and disc detection takes a bit longer than the fastest players I have tested, about average or slightly faster. The CD mechanism is a Sanyo HD650.
Inside you find a well sized toroid transformer, and there are separate power supply boards for the analog and digital parts. Each section is shielded, CD mechanism – also shielded – and the digital board is located in the middle, the power supplies on one side and the analog board on the other side. The analog output is built using discrete components operating in Class A. The DAC comes from Analog Devices, AD1955, and makes a 384 kHz upsample. A piece of equipment that absolutely looks very convincing with an aura of high end quality that can be felt even at distance. You simply don´t find this kind of construction in the price range.

PRODUCT: XTZ CD-100
INFO : WWW .XTZ.SE
PRICE : 3.800 SEK

Remote control

The remote is surprisingly light taking the design into account. The player accepts remote commands from a decent angle making the placement of the player in respect to the listening position fairly easy. But, if you are used to remote controls that can even transmit from other rooms, then it´s probably just a matter of cost if you choose to use remotes where this may be a problem. But that is surely understandable regarding the price level of the CD-100. Anyway, the CD-100 remote works p erfectly as long as the player is in sight. It´s nice to hold in your hand and manage all the functions you could ask for, including direct track choice. This being said, there are a few things that could be improved. You always have to wait for the disc to be loaded until you can press Play – or any other direct track selection. This means you cannot press Play while the tray is out and expect it to l oad, then start the disc automatically. If you are used to years of using a player that obeys the smallest hint right away, this can be a bit frustrating with the CD-100.
A matter of getting used to, yes, but as you know teaching old dogs to sit is not always easy.

User manual

I want to commend XTZ for their user manual, containing a very good section they call "Practice of sound" that covers installation and placement. The CD-100 is a low priced CD player and can probably be purchased by many people entering the world of HiFi, and that might not know very much about setting up a system in the best way. The section is written in a language that anybody can understand a that does its best to de-dramatize the matter. A screwdriver (!) and an extra fuse is included.

HDCD

On the website XTZ specifies that CD/CD-R/HDCD/MP3 and even MP3 from DVD can be read. This had to be tested of course. And yes, a HD symbol lights up in the display. Be prepared that the HD symbol may light up when least expected, as many HDCD actually does not indicate HD. On the other hand, some HDCD does not actually have the codec eventhough it´s printed on the label – the record c ompanies sometimes mess this up and have used a 1:1 copy when printing a new edition, and the HDCD flag is s ubsequently lost. That´s life.

How does it sound?

"Our referens and starting point is to reproduce a true and uncoloured sound, but we take into account that sound is always a matter of personal preference".
Now that I have double copies of some records, it´s always tempting to put one in the referens player and the other one in the test object and switch between them. This was also done of course, with the CD-100 connected both balanced and unbalanced (with the same type of cables, XLR and RCA respectively), so there was music on three inputs to switch between. We used High Fidelity referens CD No 78.
There was no bottomless difference between unbalanced and balanced, basically no difference at all actually. At least not any difference that could be down to the player, it could just as well be the cables if you can even tell the difference. Of course it´s very unfair to even compare with a 30-40 times more expensive player, but at the same time we find it very amusing to really put these cheap products to the test and see if they have anything to offer. And the XTZ CD-100 does. I can confidently say that there have been even some quite expensive players falling through in this test, but this is not the case this time.
Speaking in general terms we get a sound quality normally not found in this price range, and not even in the next higher price range either.
At first, we were not as sure as we became later, but it was clear that the reproduction exceeded the expectations looking at the price tag. The player sounded a bit held back, as if it didn´t tell the entire story. A bit "grey" and spiritless, but with the right soundstage, just that the details sounded a bit muffled. There was no aura between the musicians, and the music felt somewhat detached. A bit like a regular CD player at twice the price roughly.
As always, you should try and find the best combination. Everything doesn´t work equally well together with everything, and a change of cables turned out to do the trick. A pair of Atlas cables at a modest price of just under 150 Euros instead of the well renowned 5 times more expensive ones proved that it´s not always the most expensive products that will perform the best.
With this combination we ended up with a performance several classes better. Still slightly held back compared to the referens, but not something we would have reacted to if we hadn´t had the direct comparison.
The sound was now detailed, exciting and flowing with ease, but not persistive – it was simply just there. The character and feel is right up there in the same family as the referens. The bass reaches deep , it´s clean and surprisingly distinct. The midrange gives body and soul to voices, and the treble is hovering without lying there as a fog.
Of course, there is an obvious difference compared to the referens player, but the XTZ CD-100 could easily have costed 4-5 times as much. That´s how good it is.

Other connections

A clearly convincing sound in a high end system then. Would it do as well in a less expensive setup? We tried a few. First, more modest system in the home, then at the print makers place who has a completely different and more analog oriented system (read: the turntable is the main source), in a more moderate price ranga even if it cannot be called cheap.
We did the same test, connecting the CD-100 in parallell with a three times more expensive Marantz, that had been modified and tweaked to perform even better than the original model.
Nis had picked a record that he sometimes have difficulties following the text on. Schwanzen Sängerknabens latest a capella singing, and yes, you can imagine what the high-seasoned and very spiritual vocals are about.
First out was the Marantz, and yes, I understood what he meant. It took concentration to keep up, and all of it didn´t go through as it was supposed to from the live recording. With the XTZ, it didn´t take many seconds before we found out that all of the text was crystal clear, the room ambience was completely different and the entire impression was much more interesting and fun listening to. Indeed very convincing.

We tried the same High Fidelity referens CD, and the XTZ was superior on all parameters. Then, we switched and let the Marantz play through the same Atlas cables that the XTZ had been played with, and instantly the Marantz had improved. The problem was that the XTZ was still clearly better even with the vdH cables the Marantz had been played with. The CD-100 simply played more music. A bit more slender but with more detail, more drive , better room ambience, more engaging and much more correct.
And these were exactly the same impressions we experienced in the alternative setup in the home. What I like the most is that it does not try to impress like many other players that pour sugar on the recordings. The CD-100 plays music in a correct way without adding any synthetic glitter, and that´s what you appreciate in the long run. We can only ascertain that this is a very good CD player. Bang for the buck – well, that´s just the middle name....
When the price had finally been revealed to a noticably shaken Nis, he instantly argued that the player should remain for a few more days of "further evaluation".

Conclusion

No, the CD-100 does perhaps not play as good or as big as the high end referens player, but it do come a surprisingly far way. No, the background is perhaps not as silent and velvety, it´s not as refined, the number of details is not as large, and the soundstage is smaller than the referens, but hey! - We are talking about the same money as a tin can with a bunch of electronics thrown in. Here, we have a player that takes place in a high end system without getting embarrassed and plays like it naturally belonged there. Impressive.
The only thing that could be held against the XTZ CD-100, just like with all other cheap products that perform far above their price tag, is that there is a thing in the world of HiFi called "prestige". And that is not to be ignored, it exists, just as the comments from "better knowing" friends. There are brands that possess a completely different "aura", deserved or not.
We only have one advise – trust your own ears. Often, price and performance are closely related, but not always. Here is a typical example of such a product where you get endlessly much for your money from a sonic point of view, but maybe not much of a showcase.
Honestly – skip the prestige and listen to music instead!

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